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Religions Many; Religion One

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[An address before the New York State Conference of Religion in the Hall of the United Charities building, New York city, Wednesday morning, November 19, 1902.]

I

The theme chosen for the discussion this morning involuntarily raises in our mind's eye a beautiful picture of a united or a reunited humanity. "Religion one" suggests the throwing down of barriers and the clasping of hands in friendly greeting, that had hitherto met only in hostile encounter; but even at the risk of disturbing a lovely dream the question must be asked in a body of serious minded men and women: Is it true? Does not the theme itself embody a paradox? If religions are many, is there any sense at all in which religion can be said to be one?

If by the proposition is meant that all religions are alike, and have the same value, the proposition is not only false but derogatory to religion, since it would carry with it the implication that the term "progress" is not applicable to the religious history of the race. Nor is the proposition true if it be taken to mean that the various religions have so much in common that we may group them under one head. This is not even true of the few religions that we are accustomed to regard as advanced, and taking out of this number again merely those represented in this audience—a

very small minority of those in actual existence—and without taking account at all of past religions, it would only lead to confusion were we to lose sight of the distinctive features of each, which are fully as essential—if a religion means anything at all—as the features which they have in common. Attachment to a noble sentiment must not lead us into the maze of sentimentality. And yet, speaking now from a purely academic standpoint, from the point of one who has endeavored to make a study of religious phenomena in an impartial spirit, which to some might seem cold-blooded, I have no hesitation in answering the question in the affirmative. Indeed I venture to go farther and claim that unless we assume that religion is essentially one, we have no means of explaining in a satisfactory manner the variety of forms in which religions appear; unless indeed we have recourse to the view so popular in the eighteenth century and extending into the nineteenth, which assumed that all religion represented the deliberate invention of a body of men known as priests. The priestcraft theory has, however, been so thoroughly exploded that it need only be recalled as one of the most curious delusions that ever took possession of the minds of talented and learned men whose thoughts on other subjects than religion were marked by sanity and sobriety.

To be sure, the origin of religions is still obscure, and it may be that we will never be able to reach a satisfactory explanation of this perplexing problem, but the origin of the religious spirit which underlies the manifestations that we call religions, lies clear before us. The essential mark of this spirit is the recognition on the part of man that there are forces superior to him, which largely control his fate and shape his des-

tiny. It matters little whether, with man in a primitive state of culture, we suppose the powers of nature to represent these higher forces, or whether we posit as the source of all power a being conceived as personal, or regarded as too large for being adequately conceived at all. Nay, even though we go to the extent of placing at the core of the Universe an algebraic symbol, x , an unknown or unknowable quantity, we cannot escape the conclusion that we are not the arbiters of our fate. The contemplation of this fundamental fact in a spirit which emphasizes our weakness as against that which sums up for us the greatest strength is the religious spirit. The Prophet Micah defines the religious spirit (vi: 8) as "walking humbly with one's God," and in this definition emphasis is to be laid upon the word "humbly." Given the fact of man's dependence upon powers over which he has no control, and adding to it the humble attitude, the attitude which recognizes the weakness of man in the presence of higher powers, and you have the religious spirit in its essence.

II

It is needless in this audience to enlarge upon such a view of religious sentiment with which you are all familiar, but what I wish to emphasize is the fact that the view here suggested furnishes, in truth, the only key to the solution of the main problem with which the student of religion has to deal, namely, the existence of the great diversity of beliefs, and the almost bewildering mass of forms in which religions manifest themselves. To some, notably to such philosophers as Hegel, it has seemed possible to separate these various forms into certain well-defined groups, and to tabulate these groups by certain leading ideas

represented in each of them. With this as a basis, various attempts have been made to place these groups in relation to each other, and to show the gradual advance of religion according to the ideas for which they are supposed to stand. Such attempts however must be pronounced failures. The assumption from which they start appears to be erroneous. No particular religion is marked by a *single* predominating factor, but on the contrary all religions, whether primitive or advanced, embody a variety of factors, and so far from standing for a single idea, the one and the same religion may in its various stages emphasize a whole series of ideas. In view of this, it would seem that the more satisfactory method of penetrating to the essence of any special religion is to consider the relationship that it bears to life, not life in the abstract, but life as it is, life with its duties, its struggles, its trials. Regarded from this point of view we can well understand that the religious spirit must necessarily lead to various manifestations according to the intellectual standpoint of the believer; according to the conditions under which groups of people live; according to the circumstances by which they are surrounded; according to the fashions of the times, and even according to such factors, apparently trivial, as climate; and others that scarcely appear to be related to religion, such as, the greater or lesser severity of the struggle to obtain the necessities of life; and more of the like.

Of all these various factors the intellectual horizon and social environment are unquestionably the most significant. Hence, taking the two extremes of human society—society in its most primitive and in its most advanced form,—two aspects of religion will be presented to us in which the points of resemblance will

be infinitesimally small and the points of contrast proportionally large. Between these two extremes there will lie a variety of manifestations of the religious spirit as extensive as the varieties of intellectual horizon and social environment. Yet that same bond which unites the highest form of civilization to its most humble beginnings, will also be found to unite the most advanced with the most primitive form of religion. As little as you can break the continuity of human thought in a contemplation of the intellectual development of mankind, just as little can you separate the religious spirit of the twentieth century of our era from that of the twentieth century before it. You forfeit the possibility of accounting for the latest movement in the religious world if you separate it by an impassable gulf from the earliest form of which we have any cognizance.

A momentous question may arise at this juncture in the minds of many. What becomes, under this view, of religions for which a special origin, an origin not of a human character, is claimed? Does not the position here maintained come dangerously near the error of placing all religions on the same level? To be sure, the student of religions must not bedim his judgment by granting a special privilege to one religion that is claimed by many, and yet he would have studied religious history to little advantage who does not recognize that there are factors involved in the production of certain religions for which his social investigations cannot satisfactorily account. "By their fruits ye shall know them." The great religions, the religions which have changed the course of events, which have produced new forms of culture, which have given a new direction to human effort, all con-

tain some elements which remain as mysterious to the student—only in a different way—as to the sturdy believer who plants himself on the bedrock of simple faith. But taking into account such elements, it still remains true that the few great religions, like the innumerable smaller ones, are dependent upon such human factors as intellectual level and social environment.

III

In this sense then, that there is a bond of unity connecting the various manifestations of the religious spirit, it is true, and true not only in a relative, but in an absolute sense, that religion is in reality one. Granting this, however, the question may still be properly asked, Of what use is the recognition of this fact? Does it justify the hope that the picture presented to our minds of the unity of all religions will ever be realized? Unless it does this, it may properly be claimed, that the thesis that religion is one has a purely abstract value, a pleasant thing to contemplate, but without any practical or real significance. It must be confessed, and one cannot help doing so without heaving a sigh, that the history of religion does not appear to justify such a hope. The pages that fill the religious history of mankind, while they belong to the most glorious, are also among the saddest in the annals of the human race. In a bird's eye view of what religion has done for mankind, one is more apt to be struck by the evils that it has engendered than by the benefits it has produced. It has caused countless wars; it has led to the sacrifice of countless lives; it has produced countless sufferings, and it has aroused the bitterest feeling. * * * if we seek for the reason why religion has done all this and more, it will be found

to be largely due to the desire of a special religion to make itself the one and universal one. A strange paradox this, that the very desire for the universality of religious belief, in itself one of the noblest dreams of mankind, should have engendered those evils and crimes with which religions have been charged! What then becomes of this hope? Is the dream of a united mankind marching under the same colors to be abandoned? I claim not, but the methods towards realizing this hope must be changed.

The great lesson taught by contemplation of the religious history of mankind is obviously this; that while we must recognize that the various forms of religion are due to the factors which have been outlined, our duty consists not in endeavoring to impose any particular form upon the entire human race, but in regarding all these forms as earnest attempts to grasp the meaning of things, attempts to regulate the relationship of man to the power or powers upon which he feels himself dependent. Viewing them in this light, we will not fall into the temptation of endeavoring to remove the mote from the eye of our fellow-man, while overlooking the beam in our own. We will, on the contrary, recognize in that "humble" spirit which, as I have endeavored to point out, is essentially the religious spirit, that we are all travelling the same road, making for the same goal, enlisted in the same service. The search for truth, conducted in this spirit, will lead to a friendly rivalry and not to hostile combat. For this reason such meetings as have been instituted in this city are of prime importance. The very presence of representatives of various faiths furnishes the proof of the truth of the theme that we are discussing, and in the sense which I have en-

deavored briefly to set forth. This audience testifies by its presence more eloquently than any words, that religion is one; that while each religious body must follow its own light, each must also recognize that there are an infinite number of roads leading to the goal towards which humanity is marching.

As for the future, it is not part of our province to foretell it. The past does not justify the hope that, as long as mankind is not united by standing on the same intellectual level, and is not affected by the same social environment, a single religion applicable to all is conceivable. Yet there is no reason to abandon the dream which the thesis assumes. Only let us recognize that it cannot be brought about through the methods pursued in the past, not by coercion, certainly not by force, and perhaps not even by gentle persuasion.

IV

It would take me far beyond the limits of time allotted—perhaps also beyond the limits of the subject—were I to point out what we can do towards procuring a wider recognition of the truth that, while religions are many, religion is one, and demands a realization of some of the practical ends involved. May I briefly suggest that keeping our minds open and on the alert for the reception of new interpretations of our relationship to the universe, with a disposition to welcome new light upon old truths, even at the risk of casting aside time honored traditions to which we are attached by sentiment and affection, is an important condition, so far especially as those of us are concerned whose province and privilege it is to lead others. Having this attitude ourselves, we cannot fail in our endeavor to impart it to those who come under our

influence. May I also urge in this connection another method towards realizing our aim—a method that is very dear to me, and of the vast utility of which I am profoundly convinced,—namely, the more thorough study of religions—our own, in the first instance, but also others than our own in a sympathetic and broad spirit. I venture on this occasion to enter a plea for a wider recognition of the study of religion conducted in an historical spirit in our seminaries and universities. This Conference can do no more useful, no more important work than to use all the means at its command for the establishment of chairs for this study at our institutions of learning, to be filled by specialists who will train the coming generations of teachers and thinkers, in the various branches of human activity, to the full realization of the meaning that attaches to the theme of our discourse—that while religions are many, religion *is* essentially one. Let us dismiss the base and unworthy fear that the study of religions can be detrimental to the cause of religion. The universal religion will not come, the dream of a united mankind will surely not be realized, until we understand one another. There is only one means of bringing about this understanding, and that is by the study of each other, by an earnest and thorough endeavor to learn what the various religions of mankind have stood for, and stand for, what they have done, and also what they have failed to do. And of this too, we may rest assured, that the universal religion, when it comes, will certainly be marked, whatever else it may be, by the broadest possible charity, by the largest measure of humanitarianism, by the purest form of humility. These ends, too, will be advanced by the study of the religious history of mankind con-

ducted in a broad and sympathetic spirit. Working for such ends, we may feel confident that, whatever the future may bring, we will have done what lies in our power to reach the highest goal of mankind, the attainment of peace of mind, and the attainment of truth.

V

It is significant that the first thought of a common brotherhood was uttered by a group of men, whose proudest distinction it is that they deserve to be called the earliest religious teachers of mankind—not the teachers of a single people, or of a small group, but of the entire human race. Babylonia, with all its magnificent achievements that justly excite the wonderment of the present age, has given to the world no message worth preserving; Egypt has left us abundant evidence of her greatness and of the wisdom of her priests, but the Egyptian sphinx is silent because it has no solution to offer for the perplexing diversities existing among men; Greece produced great schools of thought that applied themselves to the task of constructing systems of philosophy that have profoundly influenced the development of mankind; but Greek philosophy, calm and serene as the gods on Olympus, is indifferent to the struggle, throes and sufferings of the human race. It was left to the Hebrew Prophets of post-exilic days, crude in their philosophy when compared to the brilliant flights of Greek thinkers, circumscribed in their intellectual horizon, when placed by the side of the learned astronomers of Babylonia. It was left to men of whose personality next to nothing is known, to sum up the lessons of the past, and not merely of their nation's past, by making the re-

generated Israel the symbol of an era when there shall be but one mankind with the recognition of a common Source of all being and power.

To be sure, the thought as uttered by the Hebrew Prophets has its limitations, subject to the conditions under which it was uttered. The sanctuary to which all mankind is to stream is Jerusalem, enlarged, amplified, spiritualized, if you will, but for all that, Jerusalem, and the deity recognized as the Father of mankind is still Israel's God, showing, to be sure, many traits not possessed by the national Yahweh, but unmistakably an outgrowth of the latter, and bearing distinct traces of his national origin. But more important than the recognition of these limitations is the fact that a genuine message, a message of hope and consolation, of encouragement and inspiration, was flashed forth from the hills of Judea, which, taken up and clarified by other seers, and given a denationalized form by Jesus, was destined to make its way, though with many deviations, to the remotest corners of the globe. In its essence, and stripped of its limitations, that message is identical with the theme of our discussion this morning; for the recognition of a common humanity is inseparable from the proposition that the diversity of religious belief is merely a surface phenomenon beneath which there lies concealed a genuine unity.